

Senator George McGovern's 'Abraham Lincoln' (2009)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU>)

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AUGUST 26, 2009 | Former Senator George McGovern talked about his book Abraham Lincoln (Times Books; December 23, 2008). He detailed the former president's political career and focused on President Lincoln's legislative decisions throughout the course of the Civil War. After his presentation he responded to questions from members of the audience. Ambassador McGovern was introduced by author and critic Gore Vidal. The event at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California, on August 26, 2009, at 7:30 p.m. PT was co-sponsored by the Nixon Foundation.

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next former senator george mcgovern recounts the life of President Abraham Lincoln he talks about Lincoln's political career focusing on his legislative decisions throughout the course of the Civil War senator McGovern was introduced by author and critic for badal is with some joy i present to you senator McGovern wise isn't even but stuck with a different set of cards so he and I sit here and look on your habitation and consider this how Dickens's was from 1972 when all things seem possible convincing me that all things one should we must gather and no that's socialism the country [Applause] [Music] [Applause] well over the years I've had the privilege of being introduced many many

[00:02:04 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=124s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=124s)

privilege of being introduced many many of important people but this is the first time that I can recall being introduced by a man who got a standing ovation just for walking into the Nixon Library and I'm very grateful to Gore for that long regarded him as our leading man of letters thanks to all of you for coming out on a weekday for this occasion I've been on a book tour of california for the last few days and while we're said to be in a deep recession today every place we've gone in promoting this book on Abraham Lincoln we've had a sellout so I'm very grateful [Music] [Applause] that includes the first night at book passage in corte madera where we sold over 200 books it includes redondo beach where we had another sellout includes Chapman University where we were this afternoon I've discovered that this Lincoln McGovern take it is very very

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Lincoln McGovern take it is very very popular but it wasn't till tonight when we added Richard Nixon and Gorbys doll that we had 700 people come out so I'm very grateful for that and thanks so much for coming out this little book that i have written on Abraham Lincoln is part of the presidential series published by x books a division of henry hold in which they propose to have an author right on the presidencies of every president beginning with george washington i was in a restaurant in new york city about three years ago and a lifetime friend of mine Arthur Schlesinger spotted me and I saw him working his way over to my table and he said George I want you to do me a favor I'm the editor-in-chief of the series of books on the presidencies of all of them since we're going to have a different author for each president and I want you to do one of these books I begged off on the grounds that i had just started working with the former Senator Robert dole on a project that i think is very important which is aimed at convincing the united nations with the united states in the lead to provide a good nutritious school lunch every day for

[00:06:03 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=363s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=363s)

nutritious school lunch every day for every hungry school child around the world [Music] [Applause] I have been interested in this problem of human hunger all of my public life many people associated me with my opposition to the war and Vietnam and that was a major concern of mine for about 10 years but the recurring issue that I've been involved in from the beginning was reducing the amount of hunger in the world I have always enjoyed eating but I was at a lovely restaurant in Los Angeles last night with my friend Patricia Kelly who's here this evening and who has been in charge of my book promotion tour and I just thought what a wonderful delightful experience that was to be in that lovely restaurant and have this with delicious mail but it also occurred to me that I would have enjoyed it even more if I knew that everybody else could have an experience like that at some time in their life unfortunately that's not going to happen as matters now lapsed and so I gave Arthur that excuse for not doing this book he said now listen George you've been telling me for 30 years that northwestern university where

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years that northwestern university where you went is better than Harvard where I went now now's the time to either put up or shut up anyway after about an hour I said well I will do one of those books if I can get Abraham Lincoln I've always thought he was our greatest president notwithstanding the fact that he's the founder of the Republican Party but which by the way was the party of my mother and father it's interesting that Bob Dole and I had teamed up on this effort to feed hungry children he grew up in a democratic family strong strong New Deal Democrats I grew up in a strong Republican Party and we both seem to have crossed our parents but I asked both up for Lincoln and Arthur said well the trouble with that is that we've already had a request the Lincoln President Bill Clinton and he said this may come as a surprise to you but some people think that actually being elected president is more impressive than just running for it anyway I said well if he changes his mind let me know a year went by and I get a call about midnight it's Arthur and then he said guess what Bill Clinton has just told us she can't do the Lincoln book so that's why I'm here and authorization

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and authorization [Applause] [Music] it's interesting about Lincoln Gore once wrote a fascinating historical novel about Lincoln I think it's one of the better things that that Gore has have written but he will verify what I'm about to tell you that over six thousand books have been written about Lincoln more than all the other presidents combined I think one reason for that is that people admire the enormous handicaps that Lincoln had to overcome to achieve the status historians have given Emma's are our greatest president woman one of those handicaps was the unbelievable limitation on his formal education one year of Education but during that time he learned to read and he learned to write and he never stopped reading reading reading reading all of his life and enlarging his wisdom enlarging his insights into human beings and into human the history and he learned the right there is a brilliant new book out called Lincoln's sword and Lincoln sword in that author's book is his capacity to write I I don't know whether gore would agree with me on this but I think he was the best writer ever

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but I think he was the best writer ever to sit in the White House he didn't have ghost writers but he studied literature he studied history he studied the King James version of the Bible he studied Shakespeare and he became probably the greatest writer ever deserved in the White House I think one of the reasons for Lincoln's fame are those great speeches and letters that he wrote he's been gone now for a long time but those speeches are still readily available to it so that's one achievement that has always impressed me another another great handicap that Lincoln had was what today we would call clinical depression it's a widespread malady among our fellow citizens we have a daughter who suffered from clinical depression from teenage on she medicated it with alcohol she was in great spells of despondency and the one thing that would bring her out of it was a half a bottle of vodka and she was then the life of the party but it eventually

took her life as it does divides us so many of our fellow citizens but I learned something about depression during that period it can thank you and two spells of despondency that are indescribable it can take your appetite it can rob you of your zest for life you go to bed at night hoping you

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life you go to bed at night hoping you might not wake up in the morning Lincoln though talked about suicide repeatedly in his life he told one of his state senators in the legislature at Springfield Illinois that he had quit carrying a knife for fear he would slit his wrist or his throat some day it's not clear what causes depression and any of us or in Lincoln but there were various things that seemed to contribute to it the death of n Rutledge whom some historians say was his first real love I don't know how they knew that but in any event that was the birdie sometimes it might be the bankruptcy of a business and he went through that twice with small stores that he attempted to run that each time bankrupted him it might have been the loss of an election I know a little bit about that it's more fun to win than it is to lose it might be bad weather doctors today say it's a chemical deficiency might had some hereditary aspects to it but in any event Lincoln had to grapple with that miserable affliction through much of his life he was in his office one day during the Civil War and this is another paradox in his life he hated war and

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paradox in his life he hated war and then had to preside over four years of it one day when a group of women were waiting to see him they heard him laughing in his office every two or three men there in the guffaws were coming out into the reception area so when the women got in the chair person said that we're pleased to meet you mr. president and we thank you for your time but we are disturbed that you would be laughing in the midst of this terrible war that's killing young Americans both north and south Lincoln said ma'am I can appreciate your concern over that I understand that but if I could not occasionally laughs my heart would break in this terrible scourge that is upon the land and the women accepted that but I think it's I think it's a great tribute to Lincoln that he had this miserable attack of spa despondency time after time without any medication of the kind that we have today no prozac no paxil no lithium no electric shock therapy he took that illness on the loan so i believe the Lincoln deserves to be considered as an admirable figure not only because he overcame the limitation of education but also because he took on this terrible monster of the depression that afflicted

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monster of the depression that afflicted him so much of his life Lincoln thought that his greatest achievement was the Emancipation Proclamation respectfully I would beg to disagree the Emancipation Proclamation was a seminal declaration in our history and something of great importance although it didn't free Wade's anywhere except in the 11 states of the Confederacy where Lincoln was really powerless to enforce it but it was the beginning of the emancipation of the slaves and in that sense it was important but I think the most important achievement of Lincoln is that he preserved the Union when we sing my country tis of thee or the star-spangled banner or god bless america we're manifesting our pride in the United States of America and that's what Lincoln preserved was the United States of America which was a sizable achievement he had the capacity I think of a clever shrewd politician but also he had the visionary capabilities of a statesman and both of those things were essential in his makeup you don't land in the White House without some knowledge of politics and the ability to work within the political process of this country and yet it's not really

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this country and yet it's not really worth getting to the White House if you don't have more than political skills and political Talent Lincoln also had a vision for this country he admired Jefferson's Declaration of Independence above all other documents we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and among these are life liberty and the food of happiness Lincoln said one day that he never had a worthwhile political thought that did not derive from the

Declaration of Independence he wasn't perfect in the White House he during the pressures of the Civil War he lifted the writ of habeas corpus which is one of our most priceless legal guarantees in this country the right to know why we're being arrested why were in jail and to come before a magistrate to be told what the charges are and whether or not they're valid for holding us in prison that's one of the things that I objected to about sending these young men that scooped off the streets of Baghdad down to the Guantanamo base and [Music] [Applause] [Music] [Applause] they neither knew why they were being held nor did they have any

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held nor did they have any recommendation from a judge as to whether or not they should be held and that's that's too bad but we can't condemn that kind of behavior on the part of President Bush jr. and then say it's okay for Lincoln to lift the grip of a pious corpus it's not okay and it's one failure on the part of his administration Lincoln also closed down some of the newspapers that were excessively critical of his administration I've often wished in politics I had that power but we don't have that power we don't have it we have to stand up and take it what an editor tells us we're off base and so that was another mistake on Lincoln's part but by and large he did so many things that strengthened this country and preserved this country that we have to see the whole picture some some biographers have overlooked some of the important things that happened in the Lincoln administration that had nothing to do with the Civil War the Homestead Act that's one of the most important tax in American history because it established the pattern of family farming that became the cornerstone of agriculture in this country 160 acres would go to any American who would live on that slice of the public lands and pharma for five years at the end of the five years the government gave you

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the five years the government gave you that land and that was about the size of family farms in this country for a hundred years they've gotten bigger now but one of the reasons American agriculture has been the envy of the world is that we've had these family farm size structures they possess a they've gotten bigger now but still the principle of family farming continues what is the family farm it's one that's about the size that a family can operate without hiring large numbers of industrial workers that came in the Lincoln administration in 1862 right in the heart of the Civil War the land-grant College Act the morel act as it was more correctly known as provided for the federal government to underwrite land-grant colleges in all of the states so we have Penn State we have I Allah state in California we have the agricultural and mechanical science university there of tremendous importance to the development the United States a third thing they created the United States Department of Agriculture again right in the middle of the Civil War and then not to be outdone they built the Transcontinental railway during the Civil War stretching from Omaha Nebraska all the way to say commander lengthen loved railways and he became a very successful attorney the

[00:26:00 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=1560s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=1560s)

became a very successful attorney the railroads but here was this great structured the Transcontinental Railroad if I had my way we would once again today begin building the fastest the cleanest the safest the most efficient railway network in the world if you if you take those for actions that I've just mentioned that's a pretty good record for any administration and they shouldn't be forgotten well these are just a few of my thoughts on Abraham Lincoln we have this great Mount Rushmore monument out in South Dakota with before faces carved on the side of the mountain Washington on one end Linkin on the other and Thomas Jefferson and theodore roosevelt in the mid section if it's a great inspiration to see it I think Lincoln belongs on that monument is one of our great president I'm going to take a few questions from the floor and then after we do that I will sign books I hoped for a long time I want to I want to explain them I want to explain to you that I don't keep any of the money I get to the books I've written it isn't that I don't need the money but I have that I have some foundation work that involved including foundation on alcoholism and that's

[00:28:00 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=1680s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=1680s)

foundation on alcoholism and that's where the any of the royalties that i receive go my books don't sell like doors and that's why he's a lot richer and then that i am but i want to thank you guys for being with us tonight you honor us with you okay I'll take your questions and since I don't get to the Nexen presidential library too often you can ask questions on anything you want to raise time somebody had a hand up over over here them okay thank you just stand up and speak loudly and I think they'll then oh maybe just go away here we are here's the microphone over here saying I saw a leather cannon in 1960 recording the show my question is how do you do would you have one with him for president or vice-president in other words had Senator Robert Kennedy David Oh would you have run with him interviewing with he had asked me I certainly would ya I certainly would have thought about it yeah I you know I think this Kennedy family is one of the most remarkable families in the history of American politics that doesn't mean I think they were perfect they certainly wouldn't claim that for themselves but losing a ted kennedy of today actually yesterday

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again made me sad to reflect on these brothers in the Kennedy clan each one of them had certain talents I think Ted was the best senator of the three partly because the other two Robert Kennedy and John Kennedy had their eye on the White House and Ted at least after the tragedy at Chappaquiddick had his eye on being the best senator he could possibly be in I think he achieved that he was a great senator but with regard to your question that no one of three ever asked me to run with him but if they had yet I would have thought about it then by the way I don't claim to be the world's leading expert on how to pick a vice president answer my question partially I was just wondering if from your time in the Senate if you had any particular individual memories of ted because it's such an odd island that you're here today in his place on and that passed away yesterday so I guess I could resist asking what seems like a very overly obvious question but is there any particular bill or time or anything good or bad or just interesting you know one thing yeah I mentioned a couple of things that I admired about Ted Kennedy number one after that tragedy at Chappaquiddick I think many people would have just quit politics after that Ted

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have just quit politics after that Ted certainly didn't need the job any one of those Kennedy brothers could have been a full-time what playboy if they had wanted the day instead of be the working as hard as they did in public service but I saw Ted in his office within two or three days of that Chappaquiddick tragedy seven o'clock in the morning I saw him there at seven o'clock night and that was his pattern to get up and work as hard as he could that's what he did for 47 years he and i arrived in the Senate the same day in 1962 and I said in the back row the Senate with head for a number of years freshman senators always started in the back row he and I chose not to move up even though senior he would it permitted that I come from South Dakota were wild bill hickok got shot in the back saying show you there's some advantage but being in the back row when no one can get behind you but gaylord nelson of wisconsin also said stayed in the back when I said doing one day you know Gaylord one problem with the seats back here is sometimes hard to hear the discussion on the Senate floor he says that's what makes it the best seat in the house well to be more serious about

[00:34:00 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=2040s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=2040s)

the house well to be more serious about this Ted was a great senator and he hardly missed a day in his office I think that takes a certain amount of guts to survive an embarrassing incident of that kind as he did and yet keep working the other thing I admired about him on a personal basis if any senator had a loss a child got in trouble spouse had died any other setback he was the first person to call when our daughter Terry died it was a really tragic thing for owner and made and he was there at nine o'clock the next morning with his wife and to express sympathy he was in person I suppose the repeated tragedies and his own family had something to do with that but he was a very thoughtful person I thought a lot of them as a human being service and her scholarship and the court to reading your book and thank you again for your dedication to truth and dignity and your humility like [Applause] my question goes back to Abraham Lincoln and his brief

tenure in the House of Representatives he stood up and criticizing them the award between United States and innovation of Mexico how do you compare your own outcry against the word that honey compared with your political costs that he suffers with your yes well there is a

[00:36:01 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=2161s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=2161s)

suffers with your yes well there is a parallel there Lincoln mom as you say had only one term in the House of Representatives is not entirely clear that he didn't go back to the house because of his opposition to the war in Mexico but certainly that was a hazardous position to take it's always hazardous to oppose a war once the bands began to play and the flags ways and to criticize the war in progress is dangerous politically I knew that during all those days when I was opposed to the war in Vietnam in fact I thought I would not survive beyond one term as it turns out by the time I came up to reelection most of my constituents were beginning to question the war and so I I survived but it is the hazardous position at the end I do wish that more senators and congressmen would take a look at our growing military involvement in Afghanistan [Music] I think that's a really really how shall I say it an unwise military adventure I am for Barack Obama everybody knows I'm the Democrat I have a high regard I think he's a talented articulate capable man but i think he was wrong to commend to the office and almost immediately send another twenty one thousand young Americans into Afghanistan and you know from history that it will only be a few

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from history that it will only be a few months when the Joint Chiefs are asking for another 25 another 30,000 I don't want us to see I don't want to see us go down that's what we slope as we did in Vietnam and in Iraq another ill-advised war that we never should've added you know [Music] there there are many reasons why I wish we got a Lincoln speaking out against the war in Afghanistan for one thing we just can't afford these wars and in my web were 14 trillion dollars in debt right now and a major part of that is from the war in Iraq and the subsequent war in Afghanistan so even on the dollar and cents stand when we got to be a little more careful before we order American forces into these conflicted parts of the world like the metal leaf I think Genghis Khan was the first one to invade Afghanistan but he was followed by the British and then more recently by the Russians the Russians that put a hundred thousand cracks roots in there 25 thousands then were killed dead on the battlefield more than that number crippled or injured the russian treasury was Jane its range of a breaking point and after 11 years they fund they limped out of there defeated and I fear that possible future for all of us so if I

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possible future for all of us so if I were in the Senate I'd be raising lots of questions about why we are in Afghan stand one question I'd like to how do we know when we went in front afraid but what if we got at the end of the end of the war so those are things that I think a lot about and that is one of the reasons I admire Rankin I don't I don't know all the details of the war and Mexico and not a specialist done that but I admire his courage I'm a history major and I took history Vietnam class over the summer and of course your name was talked about a lot because it's a vietnam-era and I was kind of disappointing cuz I got a 90 s % of the class but it's all by men I'm really hard for that is the Vietnam era and I was wondering if you at once if you would one in 1976 yes and what would you have done as pres money we always hear about the campaign stuff but you know so many years down the line I mean looking back now knowing what you know now and everything what would you have done as Alexis in the bar trivia problems Russia the economy everything like that well thank you thinking about all those headaches is one reason I'm probably glad I didn't win but but to be more serious about it this is what I would like to think I would have done that's what I had in my mind some years ago Gorbachev the Soviet leader met with mrs. Thatcher in England and she was

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mrs. Thatcher in England and she was very impressed with him and she called her friend President Reagan and said this is a guy we ought to talk to he was a serious man and to his credit President Reagan agreed to do that also to his credit when Gorbachev proposed that the time had come to end the Cold War to stop the arms race and to negotiate lower levels of military spending President Reagan agree and I think that's one of the most important things he did because for all practical purposes that meeting between President Reagan and President Gorbachev ended the Cold War and so the day we don't we don't really worry today about the Soviets may be clobbering us with a nuclear attack the Cold War's largely over to his credit President Nixon opened the door to Communist China I think that was the greatest achievement of his years in office today nobody thinks China going to attack the United States they may worry a little bit about Chinese merchandiser crowding out ours but we get along reasonably well with China and with Russia and you have to give credit to President Reagan and the President Nixon that we no longer have the sign of Soviet bloc we no longer go to bed at night wondering if we might be eliminated during the V&A I would have pressed on that front very hard I would have tried to get to know the Soviet

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have tried to get to know the Soviet leaders and the Chinese leaders and I would have pressed for even larger reductions mutual reductions on both sides in the arms and a race that's been going on ever since the Second World War I want to be clear on this I believed in an adequate national defense I was a bomber pilot in World War two and after I signed up for pilot training there was a year passed before they could take me because they didn't have any planes they didn't have any instructors I don't want us to see if get into that situation again but neither do I want to see what President Eisenhower warned us against the mounting power of the military industrial complex take over the federal budget [Applause] [Music] and you know if I can digress here a little bit from Abraham Lincoln today as we meet here tonight we have a military budget of five I'm sorry 650 billion dollars two-thirds of a trillion you know how much money that is it's more than all the other countries in the world spend on military activities or military equipment we got a hundred and eighty five countries in the world at last count and a hundred and eighty-four

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last count and a hundred and eighty-four them spend on military purposes less than the one country the United States does we have to be strong in a dangerous world we don't have to waste money on weapons systems that are now becoming obsolete I would have tried even as early as 1972 and I proposed this during the campaign that we undertake carefully developed reductions in military oddies and divert the savings into other sources of national strength health care education [Applause] charm so those are that's one of the big changes i would have I would have tried to put into effect you know there's a lot of good ideas I'd like to see implemented what other people would like to see implemented but when you spend as much money as we do on the military it really tightens up on what you can do in other areas I think we need a new definition the National Defense under which the quality of our education and the quality of our healthcare the the cleanliness of our environment those things would also be included as natural defenses ok we'll we'll take one more question and then we're going to start selling books here as well so i have to tell you because there's so many people here we'd

[00:48:00 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=2880s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH2eA7CWqfU&t=2880s)

because there's so many people here we'd better just take time to autograph which I can't write in all the wonderful things you've done in public life so if you'll be satisfied just for the george mcgovern will start that in a few minutes here thank you so much give it here is that one more question question 1 one old and one there's a very short with respect to water gauges anything that you always want to bring up I've never had a chance to publicise or bring out yeah would you repeat your question is there anything about Watergate if you always wanted to bring out it ever became public or public enough water tasted you'd like to point out that oh not yes the question was is there anything about Watergate that I would like to bring out that hasn't yet been brought out no I don't think so I I thought they did a pretty good job that's the investigating the

Watergate well thanks ever so much and Georgia life-sign Thank You senator McGovern senator McGovern will be signing books back there please sign up for our email list if you haven't already we'll have some wonderful events in the fall thank you very much for coming to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library Museum good night this book is part of times books American president series for more information visit Americanpresidentseries.com Joe

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